

2024 Is the New 1984: Big Brother and the Rise of the Security Industrial Complex



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Feb 9, 2024 6 min



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| *Big Brother is watching you.—George Orwell, 1984*

2024 is the new 1984.

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Forty years past the time that George Orwell envisioned the stomping boot of Big Brother, the police state is about to pass off the baton to the surveillance state.

Fueled by a melding of government and corporate power—the rise of the security industrial complex—this watershed moment sounds a death knell for our privacy rights.

An unofficial fourth branch of government, the Surveillance State came into being without any electoral mandate or constitutional referendum, and yet it possesses superpowers, above and beyond those of any other government agency save the military.

It operates beyond the reach of the president, Congress and the courts, and it marches in lockstep with the corporate elite who really call the shots in Washington, DC.

This is the new face of tyranny in America: all-knowing, all-seeing and all-powerful.

Tread cautiously.

Empowered by advances in surveillance technology and emboldened by rapidly expanding public-private partnerships between law enforcement, the Intelligence Community, and the private sector, the Surveillance State is making the fictional world of 1984, Orwell's dystopian nightmare, our looming reality.

1984 portrays a global society of total control in which people are not allowed to have thoughts that in any way disagree with the corporate state. There is no personal freedom, and advanced technology has become the driving force behind a surveillance-driven society. Snitches and cameras are everywhere. People are subject to the Thought Police, who deal with anyone guilty of thought crimes. The government, or “Party,” is headed by Big Brother, who appears on posters everywhere with the words: “Big Brother is watching you.”

Indeed, in our present age of ubiquitous surveillance, there are no private lives.

Everything is increasingly public.

What we are witnessing, in the so-called name of security and efficiency, is the creation of a new class system comprised of the watched (average Americans such as you and me) and the watchers (government bureaucrats, technicians and private corporations).

We now find ourselves in the unenviable position of being monitored, managed and controlled by our technology, which answers not to us but to our government and corporate rulers.

This is the fact-is-stranger-than-fiction lesson that is being pounded into us on a daily basis.

In this way, *1984*, which depicted the ominous rise of ubiquitous technology, fascism and totalitarianism, has become an operation manual for the omnipresent, modern-day surveillance state.

There are roughly one billion surveillance cameras worldwide and that number continues to grow, thanks to their wholehearted adoption by governments (especially law enforcement and military agencies), businesses, and individual consumers.

Surveillance cameras mounted on utility poles, traffic lights, businesses, and homes. Ring doorbells. GPS devices. Dash cameras. Drones. Store security cameras. Geofencing and geotracking. FitBits. Alexa. Internet-connected devices.

Stingray devices, facial recognition technology, body cameras, automated license plate readers, gunshot detection, predictive policing software, AI-enhanced video analytics, real-time crime centers, fusion centers: all of these technologies and surveillance programs rely on public-private partnerships that together create a sticky spiderweb from which there is no escape.

With every new surveillance device we welcome into our lives, the government gains yet another toehold into our private worlds.

As the cost of these technologies becomes more affordable for the average consumer, an effort underwritten by the tech industry and encouraged by law enforcement

agencies and local governing boards, which in turn benefit from access to surveillance they don't need to include in their budgets, big cities, small towns, urban, suburban and rural communities alike are adding themselves to the surveillance state's interconnected grid.

What this adds up to for government agencies (that is, FBI, NSA, DHS agents, etc., as well as local police) is a surveillance map that allows them to track someone's movements over time and space, hopscotching from doorbell camera feeds and business security cameras to public cameras on utility poles, license plate readers, traffic cameras, drones, etc.

It has all but eliminated the notion of privacy enshrined in the Fourth Amendment and radically re-drawn the line of demarcation between our public and private selves.

The police state has become particularly adept at sidestepping the Fourth Amendment, empowered by advances in surveillance technology and emboldened by rapidly expanding public-private partnerships between law enforcement, the Intelligence Community, and the private sector.

Over the past 50-plus years, surveillance has brought about a series of revolutions in how governments govern and populations are policed to the detriment of us all. Cybersecurity expert Adam Scott Wandt has identified three such revolutions.

The **first surveillance revolution** came about as a result of government video cameras being installed in public areas. There were a reported 51 million surveillance cameras blanketing the United States in 2022. It's estimated that Americans are caught on camera an average of 238 times every week (160 times per week while driving; 40 times per week at work; 24 times per week while out running errands and shopping; and 14 times per week through various other channels and activities). That doesn't even touch on the coverage by surveillance drones, which remain a relatively covert part of police spying operations.

The **second revolution** occurred when law enforcement agencies started forging public-private partnerships with commercial establishments like banks and drug stores and parking lots in order to gain access to their live surveillance feeds. The use of automatic license plate readers (manufactured and distributed by the likes of Flock

Safety)), once deployed exclusively by police and now spreading to homeowners associations and gated communities, extends the reach of the surveillance state that much further afield. It's a win-win for police budgets and local legislatures when they can persuade businesses and residential communities to shoulder the costs of the equipment and share the footage, and they can conscript the citizenry to spy on each other through crowdsourced surveillance.

The **third revolution** was ushered in with the growing popularity of doorbell cameras such as Ring, Amazon's video surveillance doorbell, and Google's Nest Cam.

Amazon has been particularly aggressive in its pursuit of a relationship with police, enlisting them in its marketing efforts, and going so far as to hosting parties for police, providing free Ring doorbells and deep discounts, sharing "active camera" maps of Ring owners, allowing access to the Law Enforcement Neighborhood Portal, which enables police to directly contact owners for access to their footage, and coaching police on how to obtain footage without a warrant.

Ring currently partners with upwards of 2,161 law enforcement agencies and 455 fire departments, and that number grows exponentially every year. As *Vice* reports, "Ring has also heavily pursued city discount programs and private alliances with neighborhood watch groups. When cities provide free or discounted Ring cameras, they sometimes create camera registries, and police sometimes order people to aim Ring cameras at their neighbors, or only give cameras to people surveilled by neighborhood watches."

In November 2022, San Francisco police gained access to the live footage of privately owned internet cameras as opposed to merely being able to access recorded footage. No longer do police even have to request permission of homeowners for such access: increasingly, corporations have given police access to footage as part of their so-called criminal investigations with or without court orders.

The **fourth revolutionary shift** may well be the use of facial recognition software and artificial intelligence-powered programs that can track people by their biometrics, clothing, behavior and car, thereby synthesizing the many strands of surveillance video footage into one cohesive narrative, which privacy advocates refer to as 360 degree surveillance.

While the guarantee of safety afforded by these surveillance nerve centers remains dubious, at best, there is no disguising their contribution in effecting a sea change towards outright authoritarianism.

For instance, as an in-depth investigative report by The Associated Press concludes, the very same mass surveillance technologies that were supposedly so necessary to fight the spread of COVID-19 are now being used to stifle dissent, persecute activists, harass marginalized communities, and link people's health information to other surveillance and law enforcement tools.

As the AP reports, federal officials have also been looking into how to add "'identifiable patient data,' such as mental health, substance use and behavioral health information from group homes, shelters, jails, detox facilities and schools," to its surveillance toolkit.

These cameras—and the public-private eyes peering at us through them—are re-engineering a society structured around the aesthetic of fear and, in the process, empowering "people to not just watch their neighborhood, but to organize as watchers," creating not just digital neighborhood watches but digital gated communities.

Finally, there is a repressive, suppressive effect to surveillance that not only acts as a potentially small deterrent on crime but serves to monitor and chill lawful First Amendment activity.

As Matthew Feeney warns in *The New York Times*, "In the past, Communists, civil rights leaders, feminists, Quakers, folk singers, war protesters and others have been on the receiving end of law enforcement surveillance. No one knows who the next target will be."

No one knows, but it's a pretty good bet that the surveillance state will be keeping a close watch on anyone seen as a threat to the government's chokehold on power.

After all, as I make clear in my book *Battlefield America: The War on the American People* and in its fictional counterpart *The Erik Blair Diaries*, the Surveillance State

never sleeps.

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